

I'm ashamed to admit this, but in the spirit of total honesty and transparency, I will.

*When I was twelve, I stole money from my mother's purse. (gesture of dramatic repentance and remorse)*

Now I don't want you to think I was a kleptomaniac as a kid- I shared with you many years ago about how me and my friends used the "five-finger discount" when we stole candy from the corner store on the way to school. I wasn't *that* bad, but I did stupid things as a child, and I have to admit that. I don't even remember why I stole the money from my mom's purse- it might have been on a dare from one of my friends- but in any case, the fact that we were poor and really struggling financially- once we had to literally scour our apartment for coins to buy some bread and some milk- all that of course makes it even worse.

What I do remember is that when my mom found out- and how she did find out, I'll never know- is that she screamed at me, and that she had to stop my father from giving me the belt. I more than deserved to be screamed at, and what really hurt me was that she said she didn't know if she could ever trust me again. *(another gesture of dramatic repentance and remorse)*

It was a tense couple of days after that, believe me, and my parents were mad, and they had every right to be. It goes without saying that they loved me and they weren't going to hold this over my head forever. But all this did something to me- it made me begin to at least think about what I was doing and to not always do things that I knew was wrong. I didn't understand the idea of a conscience yet, but I knew well enough the feeling that you shouldn't act on something that is wrong simply because you feel like it or because someone is pressuring you to do something.

Don't get me wrong- I was still far from an angel- but now I felt like I was a different person and that I had a second chance. And for a twelve-year-old, that's pretty good.

Because one's life is never determined by what you did or didn't do in the past- you always have a second chance, and you can always re-invent yourself- you can always rise above it all and try again. Which St. Peter knew very well. Peter was not defined by his impetuosity or his many mistakes or even by his denials of Jesus- three times remember- denials which tore him apart and which probably made him doubt himself and what he was called by Jesus to do.

You almost want to think that Peter forgot that he denied Jesus three times while Jesus began the awful experience of His Passion- of His suffering- and so when Jesus asks him the third time on the seashore if he loves Him, Peter gets exasperated- *"Lord, you know that I love you!"* And you can bet he thought to himself in that moment- *"Oh, wait- I denied Him three times and He's asking me three times if I love Him. Now I get it..."* Peter was not always the sharpest tool in the shed, but he always got it eventually.

But in the end, Peter was defined not by all that but instead by his love of Jesus and his desire to spread the good news of what God had done for the world in Jesus. In other words, Peter was willing to do the hard work of rehabilitating himself.

This rehabilitation of Peter is of course not unique to Peter. We have all denied/betrayed Jesus in one way or another- I doubt very much that anyone here publicly and scandalously renounced their faith in Jesus, but I think it's fair to say that all of us, at one time or another, and in many and varied ways, have failed to keep Jesus as the center and the focus of our lives, preferring to see Jesus and his way of life he taught us as a nice idea but not one that really made a difference in how we see the world or in how we live our lives.

Our own rehabilitation can be painful and it can be something we would rather avoid because it does demand that we face up to the mistakes of our past, but this should not discourage us from accepting Jesus' continuing and loving offer of a new chance. The new life that the risen Jesus has sent upon the world through the Spirit enables us to see in a new way- seeing ourselves, one another, and even God himself in the light not of our sinfulness, but in the light of the unconditional and total mercy that God always and everywhere offers to us.

Yes, as Jesus told Peter, once we accept this new life, our life is not always our own and we may go places where we would rather not go, but we will not be alone and we will have the assurance that no matter what we do and no matter how much we screw up, God will take us back, with open and loving arms, and with no questions asked.